

A Portion of the chapter
In All Weathers

from *In Winter Snows*

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The seasons for visiting National Parks are spring, summer, autumn, and winter! Morning, noon, the sunset hour, under the stars and with the moon—all times, each in its way, are good for rambling in these places of instruction and delight. I have climbed numerous peaks by moonlight and starlight, and have stood on the summit of the Continental Divide with the winter moon. Nature is good at all times. Rainy days, gray days, windy days, all have something for you not ordinarily offered. So, too, have the sunny winter days when upon the dazzling snow fall the deep blue shadows of the pines. Forget the season and the weather; visit the Parks when you can stay there longest.

One day heavy clouds rested upon the snowy earth around my cabin, nine thousand feet above sea level. In these, and in the falling snow, I started up the Long's Peak trail, in what now is the Rocky Mountain National Park. I wished to measure the storm cloud's vertical depth and to observe its movements. Only a ravine and instinct enabled me to snowshoe through the blinding, flying snow and almost opaque sheep's-wool cloud. The cloud was three thousand feet thick.

Suddenly, at twelve thousand feet, the depth of snow became markedly less. Within a few rods I burst through the upper surface of the cloud into brilliant sunshine! Not a bit of snow or cloud was there above this upper level.

From a high ridge I watched the top surface of the storm cloud as it lay before me in the sun—a silvery expanse of unruffled sea, pierced by many peaks. Half a mile above towered vast, rugged Long's Peak. Like a huge raft becalmed in a quiet harbor, the cloud sea moved slowly and steadily, almost imperceptibly, a short distance along

the mountains; then, as if anchored in the center, it swung in easy rotation a few degrees, hesitated, and slowly drifted back. Occasionally it sank, very slowly, several hundred feet, only to rise easily to its original level.

With wonder I long watched this beautiful sunny spectacle, finding it hard to realize that a blinding snow was falling beneath it. Later I learned that this snowfall was thirty inches deep over several hundred thousand square miles; but it fell only below the altitude of twelve thousand feet and not on the high peaks.

Mountaintops have more sunshine and fewer storms than the lowlands. The middle slopes of a peak regularly receive heavier falls of rain and snow than does the summit.

The rugged mountains in all Parks are wonderful in the snow. Snowshoe excursions, climbs, skiing—all the sports of winter—may be enjoyed in these magnificent wilds. Mountains in winter hold splendid decorations—sketches of black and white, ice architecture, rare groups that form a wondrous winter exhibition. Forests, canyons, meadows, plateaus and peaks, where hills of snow and gigantic snow canyons form dazzling structures and new topography, are marvelous exhibitions. The thousand and one decorations of frost and snow flowers are treasures found only under the winter sky.

During a high wind one winter, as I fought my way up Long's Peak, above timberline I was pelted with gravel and sand till the blood was drawn. The milling air currents simply played with me as they swept down from the heights. I was knocked down repeatedly, blown into the air, and then dropped heavily, or rolled about like some giant's toy as I lay resting in the lee of a crag. Standing erect was usually impossible and at all times dangerous. Advancing was akin to swimming a whirlpool. At last I reached the buzzing cups of an air meter I had previously placed in Granite Pass, twelve thousand feet above sea level. This instrument was registering the awful wind speed of one hundred and sixty-five miles an hour! It flew to pieces later during

a swifter spurt.

Although I intended going no farther, the wild and eloquent elements lured me to keep on to the summit of the peak, nearly three thousand feet higher. All my strength and climbing knowledge were necessary to prevent me from being blown into space. Gaining each new height was a battle. Forward and upward I simply wrested my way with an invisible, tireless contestant who seemed bent on breaking my bones or hurling me into unbanistered space.

In one rocky gully the uprising winds became so irresistible that I had to reverse ends and proceed with feet out ahead as bracers and hands following as anchors. There was no climbing from here on: the blast dragged, pulled, and floated me ever upward to the sunny, wind sheltered Narrows. The last stretch was a steep icy slope with a precipice beneath. Casting in my lot with the up-sweeping wind, I pushed out into it and let go. Sprawling and bumping upward, I had little else to do but guide myself. At last I stood on the top and found it in an easy eddy—almost a calm compared to the roaring conditions below. Far down the range great quantities of snow were being explosively hurled into the air, then thrown into spirals and whirls that trimmed the peak points with gauzy banners and silky pennants, through which the sunlight played splendidly.

Stirring and wild, wonderful scenes are encountered during storms on mountaintops, by the lakeshore, and in canyons. The dangers in such times and places are fewer than in cities. Discomforts? Scarcely. To some persons life must be hardly worth living. If any normal person under fifty cannot enjoy being in a storm in the wilds, he ought to reform at once.

In the intensity and clash of the elements there is a vigorous building environment. The storms furnish energy, inspiration, and resolution. There are no substitutes “just as good,” no experiences just as great.

One rainy June day I started up a dim steep trail toward the headwaters of the

river St. Vrain, near timberline in what is now the Rocky Mountain National Park. While enjoying the general downpour and its softened noise through the woods, I was caught in a storm center of wrangling winds and waters, and was almost knocked down. Like a sapling, I bowed streaming in the storm. Later, as I sat on a sodden log, reveling in the elemental moods and sounds, a water ouzel began to sing, but I heard little of his serene optimistic solo above the roar of the wind and stream.

The storm raged louder as I approached timberline. Clouds dragged among the trees. I could see nothing clearly. Every breath was like swallowing a wet sponge. Then a wind surge rent the clouds and let me glimpse the blue sun-filled sky. I climbed an exceptionally tall spruce. A comic Fremont squirrel scolded in rattling, jerky chatter as I rose above the sea of clouds and trees. Astride the slender treetop, I felt that the wind was trying hard to dislodge me, but I held on. The tree quivered and vibrated, shook and danced; we charged, circled, looped, and angled. Nowhere else have I experienced such wild, exhilarating joy. In the midst of this rare delight the clouds rose, the wind calmed, and the rain ceased. Then suddenly a blinding, explosive crash almost threw me from my observatory. Within fifty feet a tall fir was split to the ground. Quickly climbing back to earth, I eagerly examined the effects of the lightning stroke. With one wild blow, in a second or less it had wrecked a century-old tree.

Although I have rarely known lightning to strike the heights, I have frequently experienced peculiar electric shocks from the air. I have never known such electrical storms to prove fatal nor to leave ill effects; and they may be beneficial. The day before the famous Poudre Flood, in May, 1904, I was traveling along the Continental Divide above timberline near Poudre Lakes. While resting I was startled by the pulsating hum, the intermittent buzz-z-z-z and zit-zit and the vigorous hair-pulling of electricity-laden atmosphere.

Presently my right arm was momentarily cramped, and my heart seemed to

lurch several times. These electric shocks lasted only about two seconds, but recurred every few minutes. The hair-pulling, palpitation, and cramps seemed slightly less when I fully relaxed on the ground. When I tried to climb, I found myself muscle-bound from the electricity. Points of dry twigs momentarily exhibited tips of smoky blue flame, and sometimes similar flame encircled green twigs below the lower limbs.

Later that day I came to North Specimen Mountain. There the electrical waves weakened or entirely ceased while I was in shadow, but they remained quite serious in the sun. I breathed only in gasps, and my heart was violent and feeble by turns. I felt as if cinched in a steel corset. After sundown I was again at ease and free from this strange electrical colic, which often worries or frightens strangers the first time they experience it. I soon forgot my own electrical experiences in the enjoyment that night of the splendidly brilliant electrical effects beneath the enormous mountain range of cloud forms over the foothills. Its surface shone momentarily like incandescent glass, and occasionally down the slopes ran crooked rivers of gold.

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